

“Let the Children Come to Me”

Mark 10:13-16

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One scene we have all witnessed is that split-second moment when a young child bumps her head or stubs his toe or sustains some sudden jolt in the midst of a happy play time. The smiling face gives way to a look of terror and then the tears come. And then...there is an immediate searching the room for mommy or daddy. A child knows where comfort lies. There's no substitute for mom or dad in that moment of wounding. As safe as we make the sandbox or the play pen or the seesaw, a bump now and again is inevitable. It hurts to witness these brief moments of agony, but I'm always glad to see that children know where to go with their pain. Arms out-stretched, they make a beeline to the adult they know will love them as long as it takes for the hurt to stop hurting.

This is one of the childlike qualities Jesus had in mind when he picked up a child and invited the adults to become more like that child. He didn't mean for adults to become childish, but child-like. In this case, he was hoping adults would know where to turn when calamity strikes, when things get out of hand, when the wounding is deeper than skin deep. He was hoping the adults, like children, would know where to find the love they need in order to be healed.

Where do adults go with our brokenness? Where is our wound-licking place? Or, another way of asking that would be, where can we count on finding the love of God, that love that heals the soul when it seems that nothing else will do?

Mike Hawley has brought this matter to our attention. Mike grew up at South Church, went on the mission trips, was confirmed, and then went off to college. He joined the Army and went to Iraq where he served as a security guard. He saw plenty of action. When Mike came home, there was no evidence of wounding on the outside, but on the inside he carried the invisible wounds. Where does a soldier turn when his wounds are invisible? Where could he find the love he needed for that kind of healing? Somehow, Mike had that childlike quality. He knew his healing would come if he could get in touch with the God within him. So Mike started to write. He wrote poetry and he wrote stories. He wrote about his dreams and his nightmares, his terror and his joy. Through his writing he began to find the love he needed, a love that dwelled in his own soul. Now he is working with other veterans to help them know where love is found.

At the Communion table, the minister takes a loaf of bread, breaks the bread, and announces, 'The body of Christ broken for you.' It wouldn't be the same if the loaf were left unbroken. It's important that there be a tearing, a ripping of the loaf. For, in the breaking of the bread we see that Christ's own brokenness is his way of entering our own brokenness. When we receive the bread and eat the bread, we are claiming the child-like quality of knowing where the love is found.

Years ago, maybe in Wisconsin, I noticed a church member refusing to accept the bread on one particular Communion Sunday. I thought it odd because he had always taken Communion when it was offered. Later that week, he told me he was feeling undeserving of the bread, that he somehow didn't qualify to partake that week. In my best pastoral voice, I reminded this dear man that it is precisely our brokenness, our unworthiness that Christ came to mend. At the Communion table, the invitation is to be child-like, to receive that love which heals the soul.

To come to the Communion table is to be that child who suddenly knows she needs to be with her mama and makes a beeline for her arms. At the table, we are that child. We open ourselves to all of the love that has ever existed from the beginning of time.

When I was a Confirmation student in ninth grade at First Church in Westfield, Massachusetts, the minister tried to teach us a lesson on the meaning of Communion. Many of Rev Gilbert's words went in one ear and out the other. With 20 minutes left in the class, he handed out candles to each of us. He led us out the door to the sidewalk and then into the building next door. None of us could have known that the building next door was once upon a time Westfield's city jail. He led us down a dark stairwell, through lots of cobwebs, to a cement floor area where we could see by candlelight the remnant of the iron bars that had once been jail cells. He opened one of the cell doors and had us sit in a circle on the cold floor. He asked us to imagine the brokenness of those who had been imprisoned there. And then, he asked us something no one had every asked before. He asked us to consider our own brokenness. As we pondered that question, he took out a loaf of bread, blessed it, broke it, and said, "The body of Christ, broken for you." I believe that was the beginning of my understanding of Communion...that the brokenness of my ninth grade psyche need not remain that way. I remember chewing the bread, savoring the flavor, and feeling glad that someone, the Christ, finally, understood and somehow shared my wounds.

Sisters and brothers, the good news is this: whoever receives the kingdom of God as a little child will surely enter it. In the greatest of hope, Amen!